

Organizations in Northeastern Wisconsin

On August 28, 1913, a group of people of Belgian descent formed the American Belgian Club of Green Bay. Later that year, the name was changed to The Wisconsin Belgian American Club. Both Flemish and Walloon descendants were invited to join. The group was an active one and participated in many civic affairs. One of their resolutions was to have the French language added to the curriculum of the Green Bay schools. Unfortunately, the goal was not achieved in the grade schools, but high schools did give French as a language choice. Because of the Depression and financial difficulties, this club discontinued operations in 1934. An attempt was made to reorganize was made in May 1962. A city—wide social event was planned which included a parade and large picnic gathering. The special “Wisconsin Belgian Brew” shown in the last issue of BELGIAN LACES was produced for that occasion. Interest in keeping the organization alive was lacking, however, and the last meeting minutes were recorded in July of 1962. The ladies’ auxiliary, under the name Queen Elizabeth Belgian Club, did continue and still holds monthly card games for their few remaining members.

In the Spring of 1963, at Namur, Wisconsin, in southern Door County, the Peninsula Belgian—American Club was formed. It was comprised mostly of descendants of Walloon immigrants, many of whom were still able to converse in the old Walloon dialect of their ancestors. Meetings were held in an old schoolhouse which had been built by the Norbertine Fathers who came to the area in the 1890’s to minister to the Belgian settlers. After a slow start, interest in the organization began to grow, and the membership included people (Walloon and Flemish) from Kewaunee and Brown Counties, as well as from other parts of the State.

Despite the fact that many men had served in Europe during World War II, only a few had visited Belgium. It wasn’t generally known that relatives were still living in the “old country”. At the instigation of a Belgian—American doctor from Manitowoc, Wisconsin, a group made a trip to the seacoast of Belgium in 1972, primarily just to see a little of the country of their ancestors. The news spread that Walloon—speaking Americans were visiting the country. A retired Belgian Army Colonel, Lucien Leonard, made arrangements to meet with some of the Wisconsinites. He suggested that they return once again, not to the seacoast, but to the city of Namur, the center of Wallonia.

On October 3, 1972, one hundred and sixteen people boarded a plane which took them to New York and then to Brussels, Belgium. From there they went to Namur where they were greeted by the Mayor of the City, the Provincial Deputy of Namur Province, and many newspaper reporters. Members of the Wallonie—Wisconsin Society of Namur, founded by Colonel Leonard, opened their homes to the Americans and arranged many activities for them during their two-week stay.

This was the beginning of an exchange program between the two Clubs which continues to this day. In the even-numbered years, the Americans visit Belgium; In the odd-numbered years, the Belgians come to America. Neither Club was formed for the purpose of genealogical research, but many close friendships have been formed, and, indeed, families have found cousins they didn’t know before. With much camaraderie, the exchange of letters, tapes, telephone calls, and genealogical information, we continue to keep our heritage alive and acknowledge the “ties that bind”.

Belgian American Club meetings in Green Bay in the Early 1900's

While doing genealogy on my family members, I found in some of the obituary notices that the rosary was going to be said by the Queen Elizabeth Belgian-American Club. The obituaries I found included Clayton Friex, Alvina Dantine, Jennie (Derbique) Vandenbousch, Eva Tasquin, Anna (VanBeek) Paul, Zoe (Mathys) Conard, Lucille (Peters) Bruening, Emma (Jandrin) Delongville, and Mrs. Annie (DeCremer) Lhost.

I tried to find where the name "Queen Elizabeth" comes from. However, I believe there is a connection of this club back to what was happening in Belgium at this time. A daughter of one of our members discovered that Queen Elisabeth was the wife of Belgian King Albert I who ruled from 1909-1934. Per *visitflanders.com*: Queen Elisabeth of the Belgians played an important role during the First World War. As early as 4 August 1914, she placed a part of the Royal Palace in Brussels at the disposal of the Belgian Red Cross for use as a hospital for victims of the war. The Queen was also very active in fundraising for the hospital. (There is a YouTube video called "Duchess Elisabeth in Bavaria, Queen of Belgium")

The earliest record of a Belgian-American club in the Green Bay area is an excerpt in the Green Bay Press-Gazette at a meeting of the local Republican Party in 1892: "W.J. Thomas, President of the Belgian Club, was called upon to give some information concerning the organization and prospects of the Belgian club. He did so in a most hopeful strain and said the Belgian club would be found a most powerful worker for Republican success this fall."

In 1913 there were plans for an American-Belgian club to focus on social, charitable and fraternal objectives. It soon had 500 members that were either from Belgium or of Belgian ancestry. An initial goal was to establish a school of music with its own orchestra and chorus.

In 1914-1915 the initial group raised money for those in Belgium suffering from World War I. At one meeting the topics were, "The War Belgium, It's King and It's People" and "What to do to Help Our Sadly Needed Fatherland."

At another meeting, three refugees from Belgium spoke in Flemish and French of their experiences. People from the Chicago Belgian-American club attended and spoke about efforts to place orphaned Belgian babies in local homes. A total of 26 persons from the Green Bay area agreed to take Belgian babies into their homes. By the end of 1914 they raised over \$2000 and have shipped two carloads of flour to Belgium.

On July 18, 1915 the Belgian-American Club held what they called a Big Annual Picnic at Hagemeister Park in Green Bay. A procession went down Main Street and then to Walnut Street to the park. Officers rode in automobiles. The Green Bay mayor and the Chicago Belgian-American Club president spoke. Races were held, music was played, as well as a greased pole climb.

A month later the club met with Sister Ignatius O'Cavanagh, of the Daughters of Mary of Belgium, as the main speaker. The Belgian-American club has contributed over \$200 for the Belgian relief. After each meeting there was musical entertainment. Some of the special fundraising drives included a movie theatre operator who donated a portion of his receipts to the fund. A unique idea was started by an 87-year old disabled lady in which four women started a fund by giving 10 cents each, they would in turn invite four other women to their home and request 10 cents from them. This continued on raising more money.

In 1921, 15 ladies in Green Bay started the Belgian-American Club at the home of Mrs. Julia Parmentier. She became its first president. The only requirement of membership was that they had to have a Belgian bloodline. They accepted members with either Walloon or Flemish ancestry. It was mainly a social club. In 1930 the group was called the Wisconsin American-Belgian club and had an auxiliary called the Queen Elizabeth club. By 1935 the club membership grew to 150 members. In January 1935 the club changed its name to the Queen Elizabeth Belgian-American club because a men's group called the Wisconsin Belgian club disbanded and joined the Queen Elizabeth club. As a social group they had regular meetings, picnics, Christmas parties for children, and sent food baskets to the sick. They took part in local civic activities including having an exhibit at the museum. During World War II they honored the local soldiers serving in the war and donated to the Red Cross. They also sent clothing for the Belgian relief fund, which included clothing sewed by members.

In 1962 a new Wisconsin Belgian-American Club was formed (the Queen Elizabeth Belgian-American Club continued). In the fall the first annual Wisconsin Belgian-American Club picnic was held at Pamperin Park, Green Bay, Wisconsin. H. J. LeRoy of Brussels was the president of the club. Besides from the local area, members from groups in Milwaukee and Appleton attended. The National Village of Namur was promoted, especially to the Milwaukee members who were born in Namur, Belgium. Music was played but the main focus of the picnic was the famous Belgian ethnic food. Henry Quartement of Green Bay was seeking recipes of dishes from their ancestors to compile a cookbook. It is possible these efforts led to the birth of our famous chicken booyah of which 140 gallons of booyah was made. Mrs. Gene Alexander of Namur prepared 42 Belgian pies for the picnic.

The "first annual national Kermis", a three-day event, was held in Green Bay starting on August 31, 1963. This was a cooperation of the Federated Belgian-American Societies of the Midwest. It was made up of Belgian-American clubs in Chicago and Moline, Illinois; Detroit, Michigan; South Bend, Indiana; Milwaukee, Green Bay and Superior Wisconsin; and cities from other midwestern states. Green Bay was selected as the host site because of the many people of Belgian descent living in the area. Events included an address by the Louis Schyven, Belgian ambassador to the United States. A Mass led by Father DeCleene, of St. Peter's Catholic Church, Lincoln, was held at the arena. There was music and folk dancing. The Belgian American Businessmen's Band of Detroit played several times over the weekend. A 50-mile cross-country bicycle race going through towns of the Belgian settlers in the peninsula area was enjoyed by many on the route. This race included members from U.S. Olympic teams. There was an archery tournament and pigeon flying. Rolle bolle, a Belgian bowling type game, was demonstrated. A soccer game was held between the Appleton team and the Hungarian team from Milwaukee. Special art exhibits and other displays were offered at the arena. Bus tours were available to the Shrine at Our Lady of Good Help at Robinsonville, the National Railroad Museum, the National Belgian Village at Namur, the St. Norbert's Abbey, and other local historical sites. Each state selected a candidate for the Miss Belgian-American Queen. Bonnie Bournoville was Green Bay's choice as Princess. Rosanne Piper from Chicago was chosen as Belgian-American Queen. The festival ended with the Green Bay Packer Bishop's Charity game on Monday night between the Packers and the Giants. The weekend events were published in several Wisconsin state newspapers.

On July 9, 1964 the Articles of Incorporation for the Peninsula Belgian and American Club, Inc., were certified by the Secretary of State of the State of Wisconsin. The Principal Office was the Belgian Inn, Highway 57, Brussels, Wisconsin. The Purposes for which organized: To recreate and hold dear that era in history when good fellowship was prime, when our most effectual tool was prayer and a "good neighbor". This club continues to operate as a social group with members paying dues under the same incorporation. From April to October it has brief meetings monthly that are followed with a speaker. It operates out of Namur, Wisconsin but its members are from throughout the United States.

As recently as 1995 the Queen Elizabeth Belgian American Club had members in the Green Bay. They met at various Catholic Churches and the local VFW to play cards.

In searching facebook, the Belgian American clubs in Chicago and Superior are still active. There is a Center for Belgian Culture in Moline, Illinois that provides services similar to our local Belgian Heritage Center and the Peninsula Belgian American Club. It has a museum, scheduled activities, and sponsors trips to Belgium.

In searching early 1900's pages of the Luxemburg News, I discovered there also was a group in Kewaunee County area where our ancestors lived called the "World War I Loyalty Legion-King Albert Chapter #55". The president was Rev. Milo P. Smits, director was Frank Vandenhousten, and treasurer was George Adams. I recall that the pages were from the World War I era. I have not been able to find anything else about it. I do recall that prior to WW I, there was a vocal dissent to the United States becoming involved in the foreign war. This was especially strong in Wisconsin with the State having many German immigrants. The Loyalty Legion especially with King Albert's name would have been supportive of the war effort. But, I am not sure how it might have any relationship to the Queen Elizabeth Belgian American Club.

On October 28, 1919, in Washington, D.C., King Albert, Queen Elizabeth, and Crown Prince Leopold were guests of our nation at the Capital.

Submitted by Gary VandenHouten

AMERICAN BELGIAN CLUB.

Green Bay, Wisconsin, le 28 août, 1913.

Une réunion de belges a eu lieu jeudi le 28 août, 1913, à huit heures du soir, en vertu d'organiser une société belge pour agrément et charité.

Comité élu provisoire: Président, Xavier Parmentier; secrétaire, R. Van Crombrugge.

Les membres présents: Frank Deviley, L. Fabry, M. J. Heynen, D. Maes et R. Fontaine. H. Maes, A. Delloye, Ed. Thomas, Aug. Bodart, Joseph Thomas, Edward J. Allen, Ed. Bertrand, G. Massey, A. Mathot, Leon Beaudot, Elie Van Caster et Joseph Francois.

Le comité se reunira mardi le 2 septembre à sept heures un quart du soir pour établir le règlement. Une réunion générale est décidée pour jeudi prochain à huit heures du soir, et chaque membre est invité de réunir le plus de membres possible. L. Fabry demanda de publier dans le journal d'inviter les belges à la réunion, mais sa proposition a été rejetée.

Le 2 septembre, 1913.

Séance ouverte à huit heures moins le quart du soir par le président X. Parmentier.

Le comité présent: L. Fabry, R. Van Crombrugge, M. J. Heynen et D. Maes. Membre Frank Deviley est excusé à cause de maladie dans sa famille. A. B. Fontaine assista à la séance.

Le nom donné à la société sera AMERICAN BELGIAN CLUB. Les buts de la société seront agrément et charité. Pour être membre il faut être descendant belge au-dessus de dix-huit ans. Le comité est composé de président, vice-président, secrétaire, trésorier, trois inspecteurs de finance et un comité secret de trois membres qui seront nommés par le président pour six mois. Les droits sont fixés comme suit: droit d'entrée, \$2.00; impôts mensuels, 25 cents. Il y aura deux séances par mois, le deuxième et le quatrième jeudi du mois. Le trésorier et les contrôleurs seront enjointes de fournir caution dont le montant sera fixé selon le montant de la caisse. Il est décidé d'organiser une soirée une fois tous les trois mois aux frais de la société, soit dramatique, concert, bal, picnic etc., ou sera invitée la famille des membres. Une fête sera organisée le dimanche le plus rapproché de 21 juillet, à l'intention de l'indépendance belge.

Le secrétaire demande a payer les 25 cents (rejeté). Au prochain meeting on élira le comité et les fees seront payés.

Joseph Thomas proposa de nommer maintenant. Il y a 24 votants.

Les votes pour les candidats furent reçus comme suit:

Pour président: X. Parmentier, 15; R. Fontaine, 5;
L. Fabry, 3.

Pour secretaire, D. Maes fut élu par acclamation.

Pour vice-president, S. Thirion fut élu par acclamation.

Pour tresorier: R. Fontaine, 16; August Thomas, 8.

Pour trustees: August Bodart, L. Fabry et Ed. Thomas
furent élus par acclamation.

Pour controleurs de finances: M. J. Heynen, Edward J.
Allen et August Thomas furent élus par acclamation.

S. Thirion, X. Parmentier, Joseph Thomas, D. Maes et
L. Fabry sont nommés pour avoir des membres. Ils devront en-
voyer des cartes de convocation pour la prochaine séance.

Jean Lagers est nommé sentinelle.

Le trésorier doit fournir caution dans la somme de
\$500.00 pour trois mois. Il fera imprimer des cartes de convo-
cation.

Séance remise à jeudi prochain.

RESOLUTION BY THE WISCONSIN BELGIAN-AMERICAN CLUB OF GREEN BAY

WHEREAS the city of Green Bay has a larger number of French speaking residents than any other city in this state, of whom by far the greater portion is composed of Walloon or French speaking Belgians and their descendants; and whereas the Walloon is a dialectic form of French and forms a natural basis for the study and acquirement of the French language of literature; and whereas it is universally recognized that the study of English the study of related language at the same time results in a better and more complete knowledge of the English language; and whereas up to this time but little consideration has been paid in the city of Green Bay to the preparedness of children of the French language, an but little attempt has been made to direct their minds toward the French language or toward Belgian or French ideals;

BE IT RESOLVED by the Wisconsin Belgian-American Club of Green Bay that it is the sense and judgment of this society that a knowledge of correct French on the part of children of school age who are of Walloon descent would be of inestimable value to them by giving them some command of an additional language, by bettering their English, by familiarizing them with Belgian and French ideals and fostering their pride in those things of which they should be racially proud; and, in view of the large number of children of school age in the city, who are of Walloon descent, that instruction in French language in the public schools of the city would be in the public interest.

1916 (from UW-GB archives)